



Michigan Chapter, American Planning Association

Best Practices for Community Engagement in Large Metro Areas

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Boston

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Boston Planning and Development Agency recently reorganized and rebranded to: “Establish a brand strategy that reflects the organizational reforms underway and will inspire greater trust and confidence from the people it serves—the residents and community members of Boston.

The goal of this (rebranding | reorganizing) project was to make fundamental changes to the BPDA’s culture and how they work with the community. they are redesigning what they stand for as an organization.

Our Mission

The BPDA plans and guides inclusive growth in our city—creating opportunities for everyone to live, work and connect.

Through our future-focused, city-wide lens, we engage communities, implement new solutions, partner for greater impact and track progress.

We focus on planning.

We make comprehensive city planning a priority, and use our tools to shape our city.

Our goal is inclusive growth.

We believe in an inclusive Boston where everyone has opportunity for success. We have translated ‘inclusivity’ into three relatable quality-of-life metrics—Live, Work and Connect.

We see big picture.

We look across Boston from an altitude that allows us to understand it as a complex system, and plan and shape it holistically. We prioritize the future success of our city.

Step 1

Meet People Where They Are

We engage a broad, representative group of citizens to participate in shaping their community.

To do this, we will find new approaches and tools to reach people where they are and have them interact with us in a way that is convenient for them.

Step 2

Set the Context for the Project

We help people connect a project to how it addresses the big-picture challenges of Boston, and how it may affect them personally.

To do this, we will provide the ‘whys’ behind each project as they relate to people’s quality of life, their community and neighborhood, the BPDA’s goals for inclusivity and the future of Boston.

Step 3

Define Expectations and Input Needed*

We help people understand our projects, how they can participate and the impact their participation will have.

To do this, we share project goals, and define people’s roles within the project. We explain what the BPDA will do with their input, to align their expectations with our process.

**We recommend a different community engagement process for Planning vs. Development Review. The Planning process feels more like generative research, as it will seek a variety of community input that would address a wide scope of opportunity areas across the neighborhood.*

Once an area has been planned, the Development Review process will elicit more specific feedback that will focus on addressing features that request variances from the plan, and building consensus around ways to use extraction funding or assets.

Step 4

Listen and Analyze

We listen to people to understand community dynamics and character so that we can best serve the people and businesses residing there.

To do this, we listen in many venues and formats to prioritize the community needs that will influence our decisions and advocacy.

Step 5

Take Action and Communicate Intent

We effect change, and bring people along in our process.

We let people know what is happening now, and share timelines for projects moving forward. We are clear about telling people how they can continue to participate.

Interview with Victorija Abolina

City of Boston

14 person staff

Planning done in house now, Mayor Walsh wondered why all the work was being done by consultants. The consultants don’t have relationships, don’t know neighborhood.

Strategic planning areas were developed, areas that are on transit, seeing a lot of real estate pressure in his first term, launched 4 planning initiatives.

Brought together city teams, transportation, public works, planning was the convener, came out with maps, in workshop format. Mayor asked them to stop having town hall meetings where city presented at the neighbors. Started with Plan South Boston, and Plan Jamaica town, these were pilot plans, and brought out successfully a big group of people. Looking at rezonings ultimately. Planning orchestrated, but feedback all comes from the community. Also had advisory groups, local CDC's, civic groups. And how do they engage with the city. One member from each civic group on the advisory group was expected to attend every single workshop. You do not want to give the AG too much weight, want to ensure balance. AG role really was to advise, not decision makers, not taking a vote on policy. All are open process meetings. Met with AG at city hall once a year, at beginning, middle and end. But it was always clear that they represented their neighborhood and were the intermediary between their neighborhood and the city.

There are scores of CDC's and many civic groups. Even with that, they just formed an advisory group in a diverse neighborhood, and some felt not inclusive enough

Moving forward will have AG, but also maybe a partner on the ground that will also have an engagement role.

In the most recent initiative plan, they had an OTG group who became an on the ground organizer, and city provided printing, mapping, planning and design services, all provided by city, but they were the main lead of the engagement on the ground would like to replicate on the ground. Some areas have many civic groups. Civic groups do not do development, may be just reviewing developments in their neighborhoods, but a CDC probably owns or develops or manages property, have professional development arm. Civic groups are just neighbors and businesses, a few blocks in size, they organize around things like street clean up, additions. There are hundreds of these. In East Boston there were 4 civic groups now there are 7. City tries not to get involved in organizing, but they go to all civic groups and invite them to participate.

Neighborhood Representation

Master Plan as Guide – referred to as strategic plans, they have urban design guidelines, scenarios, recommended uses, like a recommendation for zoning change. Sometimes the city works to change zoning, but use the plans to come up with to guide future development, and they want the community to OWN the strategic plan. Development by Design, rather than by market driven, or what the developer is able to negotiate with the community. Height, legacy businesses, all advantageous features that allow you to go for more density. Community in south Boston comfortable with more density if dev provided AH, legacy bus, open space. Within plan initiatives, they can be identified as benefits. A planned development area, can outline

They have Imagine Boston 2030, which is a guiding plan, citywide. The role of this plan is to coordinate the efforts of various depts., and to communicate priorities of various neighborhoods and areas of Boston. It did identify places that could be enhanced or grown, and then the strategic plans would focus on the subareas

13% inclusionary, have to be available to those making less than 70% median income, and this is deed restricted.

Boston typically has planners who are project managers and they do the community engagement. In other places, the consultants often do the community engagement. But in Boston they do it all in house, soup to nuts. They want to have ownership and empower the community. They do not put consultants front and center, the city is the visible leader, the consultants will be used for short expert presentations. This is the biggest differentiator she sees between Boston and other cities: the biggest difference is that city staff does the work. Planning also supports other department in communicating their visions. Engagement and community engagement come out of planning. Planning created a brochure to help housing dept. explain public v private affordable housing, an example of helping with communications. How to define displacement? The planning team put together the messaging and content. The content was collaborated on. Planning almost acts as interpreter for all of bureaucracy. Planners are central and should position themselves as such. Planning should be involved in all discussions early on. Implementation is often in private market and public works and transportation and parks. These departments deliver what was said in the plan, which was based on community input. Tradeoffs based on what is possible and feasible. A consultant can't rally broker this negotiation between housing and environmental department.

Transparent Decision-Making –

Role of the City – collaborative and coordinated city effort

Role of the Stakeholder Organizations in the Neighborhood, there are two types, existing organizations that have been in neighborhoods for a while and that have presence, and then there are groups that are formed in response to planning initiatives to have dialogue. Newer groups, who may not be part of early planning process, but formed as response to a planning effort. That happens a lot. City is very open to discussing place based issues, and respond and engage with any new group, even if not part of the AG that was formed at beginning of a planning effort.

Equity and Inclusion – no formal policies, but the city has an office of neighborhood services, and these folks are embedded in communities, neighborhood services, part of mayor's office, and planning relies on this group for pretty much anything. There is a liaison for many different groups, like LGBTQ, Latino, and Vietnamese, specialized in certain minority groups. There are nominations for the AG, which is after the planning efforts starts, they use the kick off and launch to solicit nominations for the AG, through open houses, and other early engagement stages.

City policy formation and education – the city conducts information sessions, and they also work with the elected officials, and EO's will participate in Info sessions, and they hold workshops, to push out information and get input. They also compact unit policy, 1.5 years process for outreach, team went out to present a fully built scenario to see if people would live in a place like that if it reduced rent. Once constructed, had focus groups to get input from professionals. Only then did it go for approvals. This came out of community feedback and focus groups and folks impacted by this. This came out of housing, but planning supported.

Boston also has an interdepartmental working group that focuses on planning issues with reps from every department in the city. Meets once a month, not just in response to new development proposals.

Article 80, large project review, scoping determination. This has to be a very large project. This is regulation, review of large projects.

There is an advisory group for each project, with nominees from planning, electeds. Although many projects need variances, and they frame what would be acceptable in a neighborhood. In addition, PDA's where an advisory group would have more influence and this is development review.

Planning in specific neighborhoods -

Resolving Conflict and Disagreements – this is challenging, planning is trying to be transparent, but the challenge is that people may not buy a rationale, for example, that something is not financially feasible. If there is an ask for more affordable housing in an area that can't be made more affordable, and the city doesn't own the land, then it is a private market development, and AAH cannot be supported, but the community wants it but it can't be done, community members often feel without affordable housing, there shouldn't be more development. No good answer, it is on a case by case basis. Through continued dialogue can come to an agreement through compromise, but sometimes they just have to lean to what community wants not developer.

Takeaway – Boston has the luxury of a lot of development and growth, and so they have the luxury of being selective, and having these conversations, and cannot approve a project if it is something a neighborhood really does not want. It is a different landscape. More room for engagement, strategies to empower community to drive decision making, easier because the city is in a good place, and have a robust Real estate market. For long range planning inclusive no matter what the market conditions.

Cleveland

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Freddie Collier Jr. Director of city planning 216.664.3466

One of the key components of the Connecting Cleveland 2020 Plan is the adoption of local planning initiatives that conform with the City's overall vision. These local plans have been prepared in partnership between the City, local development corporations, residents and other organizations of interest.

Development of these local plans is intended to empower residents and local stakeholders to craft their own vision for the future and support a "bottom up approach" to developing the comprehensive plan. These plans will form the basis for recommending changes to zoning regulations and will be introduced to the City Planning Commission for adoption.

Mr. Collier made some comparisons between Detroit and Cleveland.

He observed that there is territorialism in Detroit – maybe not open to international interest. Culturally diverse rust belt cities have to get out of the parochial and the city being competitive. The organizations

have to understand it is not about them. In Detroit and Cleveland there is organizational ego. Have to be humble enough to hear from others.

Example: Broad Zoning Initiative

1929 zoning code. There have been changes in approaches since then. Cleveland is examining zoning codes, looking at form-based codes. Cleveland has issues with developers, who want to move on projects, but contemporary developments cannot be done “by right”, so developments have to go through variance process. Engagement part is important, because some neighborhoods don’t want certain developments in their neighborhoods, and neighbors go in to ZBA and oppose.

They have traditional community meetings, and educate the people; people are uncomfortable when they do not understand something. Have to converse directly, educate and inform residents.

Engagement is not one dimensional; Cleveland uses a lot of social media, having meetings at different times. Leverage the media. Use it to shape the narrative. They use video too, social determinants of health was put on web, and was successful.

One city comprehensive plan divided the city up by districts, the CDO’s were all involved, they are city funded, and other \$ too. CDBG funds go to the CDO’s, the universe of CDC’s is shrinking, and the better one’s are taking on more territory, smaller ones are being incorporated into larger CDCs. There are maybe 4 or 5 really big CDC’s,

Cleveland leadership academy

Cleveland gathers input, listens to CDCs as constituents, but they don’t shape policy.

Cleveland has 22 community development/planning staff including building, zoning, landmark commission, 8 or 9 professional planners. 396,000 population.

Other departments, planning more than others. Community relations department too. Community dev responsible for housing and CDBG.

Short term. CDC’s are involved here. PC or design review your project is vetted with neighborhood groups.

Chicago

I reached out to Janet Attarian, and she provided contact information for her former colleagues in Chicago, where she used to work.

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Indianapolis

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Jessica noted that there are strong neighborhood associations and CDO's in Indy, but that they are not necessarily representative of all neighborhood residents. Many have been around a long time, but are not "passing the torch" i.e., bringing in and grooming newer residents to participate.

In response, Indy planning developed a Peoples Planning Academy, a training program to teach residents base level information to increase understanding of planning and how to engage with the city. Graduates serve as Planning Ambassadors, liaisons, street teams, assist at neighborhood planning meetings, and guide and inform public engagement. They are considered key stakeholders.

There was more interest in this program than anticipated. More than 120 either participated in person or through public television broadcast were trained in the first year.

The city also has a Registered Organization List, neighborhood organizations, CDO/C's, and individuals can register to be notified about developments in their neighborhoods.

She also noted that the "Uni-gov" model is a different municipal model than most big metros. Stretches from urban core to farmland. They have been doing targeted outreach in lower income areas to increase engagement, with four or five planning team members working on this. The planners mapped the poverty and minority areas, and are doing targeted outreach to these neighborhoods, and to organization in these neighborhoods.

She also mentioned the Indianapolis Resource Center, a non-profit, which supports neighborhood leadership development.

Philadelphia

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Master Plan Community Engagement

The Philadelphia 2035 Comprehensive Plan was the brainchild of Mayor Nutter in 2008; planning has buy in at the highest levels in the city. Real planning. This is a formalized, integrated Planning approach that coordinates among all city agencies. The entire process ensures that residents have access to City government and a voice in the drafting and implementation of City policies. There is a very strong tradition of community engagement in Philadelphia, and there is an expectation that residents, neighborhoods, and communities will be included at all points in the process.

There is a new department of planning and development (historic preservation, housing, and Planning commission, art commission, community development, Philly Redevelopment Authority, Housing Dev Corporation, and Land Bank) is now under this new PD department.

The city has a Citizens Planning Institute (CPI) which is a grass roots citizen education institute, and through the institute, a strong foundation for advocacy and a constituency for planning has been established. This is very new. THE CPI program educated more than 500 residents and stakeholders and this helped get the word out to get people more excited about being involved, and they also helped with facilitation.

Until the Phily2045 Long range plan was initiated 10 years ago, the city had not developed or updated the long-range comprehensive plan since the 1960's. Phily2035 was a high level, city wide vision over 10 years in the making and built on a foundation of community engagement.

As part of the planning effort, the city was divided into 18 planning districts, with a ten-year timeline for completing the planning for all 18 districts. Over that 10 year period, they have completed all 18 district plans. The last one was finalized this year.

Organizationally, city planning is housed in the Planning Commission. They have a staff of 40, and about 12 are professional planners. The entire comprehensive plan was completed in house, with no outside consultants. This worked very well for them, and planning staff were and continue to be familiar with the community groups on the ground; there are not many CDC|CDO's in Philadelphia, but of course there are many ground level business groups, institutions, and neighborhood organizations. Consultants would not have had the community connection that was brought to bear by doing the plan in house.

Each of the 18 district plans followed the same framework and engagement strategies. While it evolved from the earliest district plans that started 10 years ago, the process has matured and expanded.

For each of the 18 districts, there was a standard set of meetings.

There were two public meetings followed by an open house in each of the districts over the course of the planning period.

The city planners for each district identify key stakeholders and influencers, residents and business owners, who would guide the development of the plan.

For each of the districts a standard set of data was gathered, every parcel in each district was identified and analyzed. Socioeconomics, demographics, housing analysis, etc. Before each plan is initiated, (18 districts) planning staff conduct all the background studies. The CPI was established almost at the onset of the Philly2035 planning effort, when the district plans were getting started, so people could be informed. Because everyone know that the plan would be a monumental sea change for Philadelphia, it was critical that residents and stakeholders understood what planning is, how it is used, how they can influence the process. An informed citizenry will help plan and implement, have buy in, and have their voices heard.

At every step the key influencers, CPI grads and other stakeholders were used as ambassadors for the planning effort. The city staff also used social media, bus advertisements, traditional media, to get the word out and to engage residents, and they learned a lot about how people get information and get them engaged.

The first two public meetings data findings were presented, participants were asked about what they valued, what were barriers; they conducted mapping exercises, and made sure comments were heard. They reported back to the district residents after each meeting with a summary, to make sure they captured everything.

The third public meeting was always an open house, and folks could come at any point and provide comments on draft plans.

They also had a strong on-line presence, and did gaming. They have mirrored all of the exercises on line so folks could provide input if they could not come to meeting.

The overarching comprehensive plan is always the framework, and then the larger vision and goals are broken down and integrated.

When the plan for each district is complete, a steering committee for each district is established including key stakeholders, neighborhood and CDC|CDO representatives, professional staff from city agencies (planning, transportation/streets, parks and rec, water, etc). There is follow up to make sure efforts were moving forward. The steering committees meet four or 5 times a year, during the plan development and ongoing after the district plan is complete.

Development Review Community Engagement

In addition to systematic community engagement for long range planning, short range planning, or development review, also requires opportunities for transparency and for petitioners and developers to outreach to neighborhood organizations.

To provide some additional context, as the comprehensive planning for the 18 districts nears completion, the planning staff were already beginning to reorganize, restructure and simplify the zoning

ordinance to implement plan recommendations. While an ongoing project, much progress has been made.

Of course, public hearings are required whenever zoning ordinance map or text amendments are made, and public hearings are also required for variance requests and Special Exception Use (SEU) permits. Zoning change requests must be sponsored by a council person; a petitioner can't simply present a petition to rezone. Public meetings must be conducted to explain the change; it can be a 9 month process.

Developer driven rezoning starts with development services, then to planning, ideally.

There still are political rezoning's, wherein a developer goes right to a council person for a rezoning sponsorship.

But in the case of variance or SEU, *the developer must also meet with Registered Community Organization (RCO)*, and most of these are traditionally neighborhood based organizations (like our CDC|CDO organizations). The developer is required to meet with the RCO to present their project and solicit input. The developer cannot get a hearing with the ZBA or PC unless they have a letter from the RCO with their comments and recommendations.

RCO meetings are required only for variances and SEU's, not for by right projects.

The district planning process has become less complicated, as it has been institutionalized. Now the zoning has been condensed, combined, and simplified. In addition, there has been a concerted effort at the city to integrate all city agencies in community engagement work training for RCO's too.

Civic Design Review (CDR), a body that all developer come before when submitting plan, has two seats reserved for affected RCO's in the district where the development is, along with city team (professionals, officials, elected). This is a non-binding, advisory review board, but they meet with the developer before a project moves forward. Often the developer will change the plan in response to comments and suggestions from this committee.

A planning effort of this scale and scope requires buy in from the administration. The Philly 2035 Plan started with Mayor Nutter, a pro planning leader, who was mayor from 2008 – 16, and is now carried on by the new mayor.

Here briefly below the Philadelphia plan aspects are connected to the BECDD principles of engagement

- **Neighborhood representation** at all levels is encouraged, embraced, and there are established protocols to make it happen. The CPI really empowers people, and teaches how residents should be involved, and how to solve problems on their own without government, too. It teaches the basics about planning and zoning, and identifies critical influence points in the process.
- **Transparent decision-making:** the plan does not end and they print it and adopted. It goes into implementation, and staff are involved, they secure grants, draft ordinances for the districts. All of the implementation actions are based on plan policies so residents know what to expect.
- **Role of the City:** facilitate and fund development of the master plan and capital budget program. When reviewing budget requests they compare with the district plan, so that capital investments are based on plan recommendations that were agreed upon by stakeholders. The

water department adopted the 18 planning districts, and they no longer randomly supply water, but connect with other departments when making decisions. They are prioritizing the hundreds of recommendation.

- **Role of Stakeholder Organization:** Donna wondered if Detroit's CDC's officially represent the neighborhoods? Are the CDC's in Detroit always the voice of the neighborhood? What are you doing to outreach. Because there are other legitimate local groups whose voices also should be heard and considered. She urged caution here; I believe since Philadelphia's CDC structure isn't as robust as Detroit's, and neither is their planning and development history as fragmented, that she doesn't fully understand the elevated role of the CDC here in Detroit. She wondered if there a network in the CDC for the other organized groups? And I noted that both CDAD and BECDD serve that purpose.
- **Equity and inclusion.** The CPI is a great way to get at making sure that the residents are diverse. The training institute reaches deep into neighborhoods. She said they do not measure efficacy of programs or policies with a social equity lens.
- **Policy formation and education.** Information sharing and feedback loops are built into the planning process in Philly. From the steering committees to the RCO process, to the CDR board, formal opportunities to engage and inform are provided.
- **Planning in Specific Neighborhoods.** As above, the 18 planning districts are clearly identifiable and there are systems in place for interaction at every planning and development step.

Bonus Communities

Seattle

The City of Seattle has a robust and inclusive community engagement process that seems to cover all aspects

<https://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/outreach-and-engagement/design-review-for-early-outreach>

Minneapolis

http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/ncr/ncr_community-engagement